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ABSTRACT

Current trends in technological developments suggest that home entertainment video games and educational learning software are on convergent paths. Astute educators have identified these technologies as effective for student motivation and have integrated them with traditional curricula to reduce at-risk behavior. Counselors who identify and implement effective uses for technology are likely to maintain their positions during the current educational restructuring movement. Counselors report promising use of technology in relationship building, needs assessment, and intervention. Advantages associated with the use of technology in counseling at-risk youth include: positive associations with video game technology; covert learning without the normal resistance to overt educational approaches; multisensory approaches to learning using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities; and individualized learning which allows realistic goal setting and encourages retrial of failures without group embarrassment. Pitfalls to consider include: unappealing software, older computers, too many students per computer, inadequate staff training, depersonalization, and ethical, moral, and practical issues associated with technology and counseling. (ABL)

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Counseling Using Technology With At-Risk Youth

John A. Casey

Expanded Use of Technology in Counseling

Counselors and related human service professionals are increasingly utilizing computer technology in their counseling with at-risk youth. While early use of computers for testing, administration, career, and personal counseling relied primarily upon counseling-specific software, more recent adaptations of noncounseling software for counseling purposes are leading toward successful interventions with at-risk populations.

Who is "At-Risk?"

The literature presents a range of definitions for "at-risk" youth. Some authors identify risk factors with predictive validity for such unwanted behaviors as truancy, dropping out of school, or criminal activity. Others contend that all youth are potentially at risk of not achieving their potential. The label is often assigned to both gifted and remedial learners who do not fit the mainstream school population. The computer strategies discussed in this document usually have applications to all of these populations.

Adapting Software for Personal Counseling

The personal counseling process has been described as having at least six stages: (a) relationship building, (b) needs assessment, (c) goal setting, (d) intervention, (e) transfer and maintenance of newly acquired skills, and (f) termination with evaluation. Counselors report promising use of technology in three of these domains: relationship building, needs assessment, and intervention.

Relationship Building

Counselors and related professionals have noted the attraction of home entertainment software, e.g., Nintendo video games, to numerous at-risk youth. These professionals have infused video games into the relationship-building stage of the counseling process through several strategies.

- In Lancaster, Texas, children resistive to counseling have found *The Print Shop* a vehicle for developing rapport and expressing their feelings (Henderson, 1989).
- In Long Beach, California, reluctant learning disabled clients become engaged with the counselor through games of familiarity and attainable success (e.g., *Wheel of Fortune*, *MacConcentration*).
- In Guerneville, California, students and counselors speaking different languages find common enthusiasm with nonverbal computer games through the counselor (e.g., *Brickles*, *Hot Air Balloon*).

Needs Assessment

Counselors are reporting sporadic yet promising uses of computer software for assessing client need. One example:

- In Stratford, Connecticut, with boys ages 10–17, Margolies (1991) reports we can observe much about the child: their level of dependency on the therapist, fears, blocking points, approach to and length of play, ability to appreciate or elaborate on fantasy, sense of humor. Other games or drawing programs are used as projective tools...."

Intervention

A variety of interventions are being implemented by counselors with at-risk youth.

- In Rohnert Park, California, ninth graders identified as having the "highest risk" of dropping out are paired with graduate counseling students who together write poetry on word processors, create art on *Kid Pix*, or evaluate a variety of low cost shareware games. They subsequently visit a nearby elementary school where the older student tutors a first grader on easy but motivating learning games (Casey & Ramsammy, 1992).
- In West Anchorage, Alaska, at-risk ninth graders are trained as computer resource tutors for other teachers, students, and staff (Orloff, 1991).
- In Palo Alto, California, a counselor reports empowerment through both "playful" software such as *Jam Session* (where students can play like MTV musicians) and more serious software such as spell and grammar checkers on word processing documents (Orloff, 1991).

Prevention Through Groups, Classroom Guidance and Consultation

Professionals are discovering that software can be adapted for prevention through groups, classroom guidance, and consultation with teachers on curriculum and classroom management.

- Using an overhead projection of the computer screen, students develop cooperative learning, positive interdependence, group problem solving and social skills by playing, as a group, such software as *Oregon Trail* or *Carmen Sandiego*.
- In Greenwood, Mississippi, kindergarten use of technology "encourages students to become their own problem solvers, ...thinking and discovering answers on their own" (Goal, 1992).
- In Peach Springs, Arizona, dropout rates among Hualapai Indians have plummeted with the infusion of videodiscs, inter-

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active video, and satellite communication into the curriculum *without counselors*.

- In numerous locations, counselors are consulting with teachers to develop intergenerational communication between at-risk youth and senior citizens, through both live computer activities and electronic mail (Henderson, 1989).

Why Technology?

A variety of advantages are associated with the use of technology in counseling with at-risk youth. As earlier noted, youth usually have positive associations with video game technology; covert learning can and does take place without the normal resistance to overt educational approaches. Moreover, they represent multisensory approaches to learning using visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modalities. Individualized learning can set realistic goals, and encourages retrial of failures without group embarrassment.

Gifford (1991) lists seven attributes that make video games both fun and effective learning tools:

- *Free play (creativity):* Electronic games are not tied to the limitations of space, time, or gravity in the way that mechanical toys are. Freed from these constraints, kids can exercise their fantasies without regard to real-world boundaries.
- *Microworlds:* Computers allow us to move with ease between electronic "microworlds" from one graphical environment to another. The exhilaration of multimedia world-hopping contrasts sharply with the static feeling of conventional classrooms.
- *Instant replay encourages risk taking:* Computers can provide an instant replay of students' performances, allowing them to study, edit, or try again in a safe environment for risk-taking.
- *Mastery:* Even when kids are struggling to learn a complex computer game, they usually feel they are in control. When the worst happens, they can always shut the machine off. The feeling of control is encouraged by the ease with which players can repeat an activity until it has been mastered.
- *Interaction:* Kids tend to experience computers as partners in learning. They relish this nonhierarchical relationship in which the roles of teacher and student are blurred or altered.
- *Clear goals:* Children in the classroom cannot always see the point of learning math, science, or social studies. When they play electronic games, they are usually working toward a clear objective—making a rescue, unlocking a door, unearthing hidden treasure. Compelling goals give game players high levels of motivation.
- *Intense absorption:* Short attention spans and poor impulse control frequently disappear with effective computer interventions, supporting the notion changing the environment, not the child, can support individual success.

Considerations

As with any emerging counseling tool, numerous pitfalls exist in applying technology to work with at-risk youth. These include:

- *Unappealing software*—rote learning and other overtly educational software are usually met with yawns.
- *Waiting too long*—older computers, like Apple IIe's, or too many students for one computer create more problems than they solve.
- *Inadequate training*—constrained budgets limit training opportunities, but successful counselors work in concert with other technology-literate staff.
- *Depersonalization*—the focus should be on the client first, the technology second. If the client or counselor lose this priority, problems may be exacerbated by the technology.

Additional ethical, moral, and practical issues associated with technology and counseling are discussed by Walz, Gazda, and Shertzer (1991).

Discussion and Summary

Current trends in technological developments suggest that home entertainment video games and educational learning software are on convergent paths. Astute educators have identified these technologies as effective for student motivation and have integrated them with traditional curricula to reduce at-risk behavior. Counselors who identify and implement effective uses for technology, including CD-ROM and video laserdiscs, are likely to maintain their positions during the current educational restructuring movement.

Additional research on outcome effectiveness, individual differences in computer motivation, and other aspects of this emerging field are needed. New adaptations, such as infusion into family therapy and other counseling services, remain equally unexplored. Nevertheless, early signs of success are encouraging and challenge the counselor to remain current with new technologies and their potential for adaptation to counseling with at-risk youth.

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